



Take-along Lunches

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More and more kids and adults pack lunches for school or work. The portable lunch can satisfy the need for food and relaxation even in a relatively brief 30-minute lunch break.

Why pack a take-along lunch?

Economics: Pack-your-own lunches should be less expensive than eating out, but if wise choices are not made, they can be more expensive. This is especially true for children who could eat lunch prepared as part of the school lunch program. If the child's take-along lunch is made up of purchased packets of individual servings of food such as chips, cookies and puddings, it may cost more than the cafeteria meal.

Adults with access to a company cafeteria also may find it more expensive to carry a lunch. Cost can be kept down by using leftovers.

Nutrition: You can control the nutritional quality of a lunch if you select, prepare and pack foods so they will be safe, flavorful and nutritious. Proper planning can give you bag lunches low in sugar, salt, fat and calories.

Time, convenience, energy: Having a portable lunch means not having to spend time standing in cafeteria lines or waiting for food to be served. This is important if mealtime is limited or other errands must be done during the lunch period.

Taste: Some prefer the flavor of a take-along lunch. Favorite foods can be included. Remember to provide a variety of foods every day.



What goes in?

Just as breakfast gets you through the morning, lunch will keep you alert throughout the afternoon. Hungry people have trouble concentrating on schoolwork or jobs and may not perform at their highest levels. A good lunch includes these parts:

1. Protein-containing food – Protein comes in many forms including milk and milk products, meat, fish, cheese, eggs, nuts, beans and peanut butter. Using leftovers to provide protein may require less preparation than a sandwich. When milk is not the beverage, cheese or yogurt may provide calcium as well as protein.
2. Grains – Bread, cereal, rice or pasta
3. Fruits
4. Vegetables
5. Beverage – preferably milk for children



Sandwich ideas

Meat:

- Chopped cold roast beef or pork with chopped fruits or vegetables like apple, celery, radish or cucumber mixed with mayonnaise.
- Dried beef mixed with cheese and horseradish.
- Corned beef mixed with mustard and mayonnaise.

Fish:

- Salmon or tuna with grated raw carrots, hard-cooked eggs and mayonnaise.
- Sardines plain or with mayonnaise.

Chicken:

- Sliced cold chicken with cranberry jelly.
- Chicken spread mixed with toasted almonds or pecans.

Cheese:

- Sliced or grated with pickles, nuts or onions.
- Cottage cheese with minced green pepper and chopped, dried prunes or apricots, accompanied by chopped beet, pickles or parsley and salad dressing.

**Egg:**

- Mix chopped, hard-cooked egg with mayonnaise or salad dressing. Add one or more of these: onion, celery, raisins, green pepper, carrots, nuts, olives or grated cheese.
- Cold scrambled eggs with salad dressing.

Nuts:

- Chopped walnuts or pecans with cream cheese and raisins.

Baked beans:

- Plain or mashed beans mixed with chili sauce, chopped pickle and minced onion.

**Peanut butter:**

- With sliced apple or mashed banana.
- With sliced dill pickle.
- Mixed with grated raw carrots, raisins and mayonnaise.

Other ideas (rather than sandwiches):

- Hard-cooked eggs in the shell.
- Deviled eggs with chopped peanuts or ham added to yolk mixture before stuffing.
- Cold meats. A pork chop, fish fillet or baked chicken.
- Cheese cubes. Try varieties like Swiss, taco cheese or jalapeno pepper cheese as alternatives to the standard cheddar, if you'd like.
- Soup or stew.
- Leftover pizza.
- Stuffed vegetables or fruit. Green pepper, banana pepper or apple stuffed with a sandwich filling.
- Yogurt. Plain or with chopped fruit or vegetables.
- Lettuce sandwich. Roll the sandwich filling in a large leaf instead of using bread.
- Wrap-arounds. Wrap sliced meat or cheese around pickles, cheese, celery or cucumber slices.

**Grains – Bread, cereal, rice and pasta:**

These provide energy, vitamins and fiber. More fiber is found in whole-grain breads such as whole-wheat, rye or cracked wheat.

Calorie watchers should not completely cut out breads. Remember, most of a sandwich's calories come from the filling, not the bread.

In addition to enriched white and whole-wheat breads, try others such as French bread, pita bread, biscuits, tortillas, English muffins or bagels.

Other foods from this group that are good if they can be kept cold include macaroni and cheese, spaghetti, pasta salad, rice salad and potato salad.

Fruits and vegetables:

The best take-along lunches will have at least one fruit and one vegetable. Fresh fruits and vegetables are high in vitamins, minerals and fiber.

When served raw, fruits and vegetables need little preparation. Drain



canned fruits packed in syrup before packing them in tight containers.

Use zippered bags to ensure freshness and prevent leaks.

Fruit or vegetable salads are good choices. Pack cut fruits such as apples, pears or peaches

with dressing or fruit juices to prevent

darkening. Pack the dressing for green salads separately to keep greens crisp until ready to eat.

All fruits and vegetables must be kept cold (stored in the refrigerator or packed with ice packs) once they are cut or peeled. Already cut fruits and vegetables bought at the store also should be refrigerated immediately or kept cold.

Beverages:

Milk is a good choice because it contains calcium and other nutrients needed by everyone. But it needs to be kept very cold. If a vacuum bottle is not available, look for individual cartons of milk or containers of sterile milk (plain or flavored milk that has been processed at a high temperature so it can be stored at room temperature).

A 100 percent fruit or vegetable juice is another good beverage choice, especially if the meal contains cheese or yogurt, which has the same nutrients as milk. Check labels for the term "fruit juice." These contain more juice than fruit drinks.

Avoid fruit drinks and soft drinks. They are high in sugar and low in other nutrients. Other choices are tea, coffee, broth or water.



Freeze milk and juice in containers. They will thaw by mealtime and help keep other foods cool until then, too.

Snacks and desserts:

Try to choose those low in sugar, salt and fat. Fruits, both fresh and dried, nuts and seeds are good choices for both snacks and desserts. Buy large bags of these items and repackage them in sandwich bags or plastic tubs.

Individually packaged chips, cakes and other snacks you can purchase may be convenient, but many offer little nutritional value and are expensive.

It is OK to have a cookie or other sweet as long as the rest of the meal is eaten and calories are not a problem. Cookies with oatmeal, nuts or dried fruit are more nutritious. Keep serving sizes small. One or two cookies should be plenty.

Food safety guidelines that will help keep foods safe to eat include:

Start with clean hands and a clean work area – Wash hands, utensils and work surfaces with hot, soapy water before preparing food. If hot, soapy water is not available, use anti-bacterial wipes or lotions.

Package your food to prevent foodborne illness. Food should never be allowed to stay at room temperature for more than two hours. Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold (140 degrees Fahrenheit or above for hot foods and 40 F or below for cold foods).

Insulated, soft-sided lunch boxes or bags are best for keeping perishable food cold, but metal or plastic lunch boxes and paper bags also can be used. Wash lunch boxes or bags inside and out and wash ice packs after each use.



Pack foods only in paper bags purchased for that purpose. Other bags may be dirty or contaminated with bacteria that could cause foodborne illness. Use paper bags only once. When using paper lunch bags create layers by double-bagging to help insulate the food. An ice source, such as a small frozen gel pack or frozen juice box, should be packed with perishable food in any type of lunch bag or box. If there's a refrigerator available, store perishable items there upon arrival.

Packaged combos that contain luncheon meats along with crackers, cheese and condiments also must be kept refrigerated. This includes luncheon meats and smoked ham that are cured or contain preservatives.

Most schools provide cold milk for a minimal cost. If you choose to send your own, keep milk cold in a well-insulated thermos. Pour cold milk into a well-insulated thermos that has been rinsed with ice water to keep it chilled.



Put hot foods in a thermos that has been heated. Before placing the hot food in the thermos, place hot water into the thermos. Let hot water sit for two to three minutes, empty and fill with hot food. To keep food hot, do not open the thermos until ready to eat.

Other equipment you may use are plastic containers and cups with tight lids, small glass jars, plastic forks and spoons, miniature seasoning containers, plastic sandwich bags, plastic wrap or waxed paper. Consider equipment costs when comparing the cost of a home-packed lunch with a bought lunch.

If it's not possible to keep perishable foods at a safe temperature, select foods that can be maintained safely at room temperature. Some examples are:

Meats and beans: Peanut butter, nuts, serving-size cans of meat spreads, lunch meat, jerky or fish.

Milk: Hard cheeses, canned pudding and individual packages of packaged milk.

Grains: Bread, crackers, rolls and bagels.

Fruits: Whole, uncut fresh, dried or individual cans of fruit.

Vegetables: Whole, uncut vegetables, such as cherry tomatoes or individual cans of vegetables. Store cut or peeled fruits and vegetables in the refrigerator. Already cut fruits and vegetables bought at the store also should be refrigerated immediately. Use an ice pack to keep them cold in an insulated lunch bag.

Others: Jams, jellies and individual packets of salad dressing or condiments.

Time savers

Convenience foods save time but also may be expensive. You may want to use dinner leftovers or buy small items in large packages and repack in small containers to save money. Just be sure to store any perishable foods at safe temperatures before eating (40 F or below or 140 F or above).

Prepare large batches of sandwiches ahead of time in assembly line fashion. Freeze extras. They will keep two weeks. To keep bread from getting soggy, spread butter, mustard or cream cheese evenly to the edges of each slice. Fillings that freeze well are meat,

poultry, cheeses and cheese spreads, tuna salad, peanut butter, nut spreads and egg-yolk mixture. Egg whites, mayonnaise and fresh vegetables do not freeze well.

Set aside part of the refrigerator, freezer and cabinet for lunch items. Keep supplies replenished.

To avoid a morning rush, pack meals the night before and refrigerate. Perhaps leftovers could be packed for lunches as the evening meal is cleared from the table. If hot foods will be packed, add them to the insulated lunch bag in the morning.

Take-along lunch hints

- Make everyday sandwiches a treat by using special breads such as banana, carrot or zucchini bread.
- Two thin slices of meat taste better than one thick one.
- Share your lunch. Pack enough for you and a friend today. Let your friend bring lunch tomorrow.
- Pick a pleasant spot to enjoy your take-along lunch.
- Pack a book or magazine to help you enjoy mealtime.
- Vary the type of sandwich and use different fruits and vegetables. Always be on the lookout for new ideas. Take-along lunches with variety are fun to open and eat.

Packing a safe lunch is easier than you may think. Here are some examples:

Example 1

- Baked chicken breast (cold)
- Cucumber circles
- Cantaloupe slices
- Oatmeal cookie
- Skim milk

The chicken, cut vegetable, cut fruit and milk need special handling. Put the milk into an insulated bottle and pack the entire lunch into an insulated lunch box with a frozen ice pack.

Example 2

- Peanut butter and jelly sandwich
- Yogurt cup
- Baby carrots
- 100 percent orange juice (in a juice box)

The yogurt and the peeled carrots need special handling. Pack this lunch in an insulated lunch box with a frozen ice pack.



Example 3

- Leftover lasagna
- Canned fruit cup
- Whole-grain roll
- Water

The lasagna needs special handling. Heat the lasagna and put it into an insulated container – or send the lasagna cold in an insulated lunch box with a frozen ice pack and reheat it at mealtime.

Example 4

- Bean and cheese burrito
- Sliced strawberries
- Can of vegetable juice

The burrito and cut strawberries need special handling. Make the burrito the night before and store it in the refrigerator. In the morning, pack the entire lunch in an insulated lunch box with a frozen ice pack. The burrito can be eaten cold or reheated.



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